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SIPDIS

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TAGS: PREL IZ YM UN

SUBJECT: IRAQ: EVOLVING YEMENI ATTITUDES TOWARD A POSSIBLE WAR

Classified By: Pol/Econ Acting Chief Catherine J. Westley for Reason 1.
5 (b,d)

11. (C) Summary: ROYG policy and Yemeni street opinion publicly oppose a war in Iraq, but the underlying reality is more nuanced. The public line articulated by Saleh and senior officials strongly denounces war and advocates concerted Arab action to prevent it, but includes no/no expression of support or sympathy for Saddam Hussein. Most Yemenis remain more concerned with day-to-day matters, including the poor economy and the upcoming parliamentary elections, and numerous contacts have expressed support for removing the Baathi regime if/if this is accomplished with minimal impact on civilians. UNSC-related diplomacy which has received dramatic coverage in the West has received minimal public and media attention in Yemen. Nevertheless, popular reaction could be vehement and emotional if war seemed to drag on, or if Iraqi civilians were killed in a high-profile incident. Contacts almost universally express hope that the war will be finished quickly. End Summary.

12. (C) Media statements from ROYG leaders continue to oppose war in Iraq. President Saleh has used domestic media to maintain a high public profile out of the Non-Aligned Movement Summit in Malaysia, saying that the NAM meeting and the upcoming Arab Summit "should not be merely a verbal phenomenon that repeats words of condemnation and denunciation." An editorial this week in the official daily al-Thawra said, "Iraq will be the first field of confrontation and it is the real test for the capability of the Arabs and Muslims to defend themselves." At the same time, opposition to war is couched in terms of support for the Iraqi people and not Saddam or the Baathi regime. Numerous influential Yemeni contacts told the Ambassador this week that the removal of Saddam will be good for the region. Several predicted that only significant civilian casualties would elicit a vehement popular reaction in Yemen.

13. (S) Powerful military commander of the northern region Ali Muhsen Saleh al-Ahmar recently told the DATT that the Arab people would prefer no war, but the main concern was about how the "American occupation" would be viewed. He also said that there could be flashpoints of reaction here in Yemen, but expressed confidence that the ROYG could handle it.

4. (C) An official in the President's office told Pol/Econoff that he wished the war would be over with quickly, and that if must happen it should happen now without further delays. This sentiment was echoed to Acting Pol/Econ Chief by a leading NGO human rights activist who said "get it over with already." Several journalist contacts expressed suspicion about American motives in going to war and echoed a familiar line in regional media: that the timing of the Middle East Partnership Initiative announcement in December created questions in Arab minds about what America is "really trying to do" in this region.

15. (U) At the same time, opposition media hype has been fairly low-key in recent days. For example, out of three weekly opposition newspapers, only one contained an article on Iraq, noting matter-of-factly that a small anti-war demonstration was held in Taiz. UNSC diplomacy and the prospect of a new UNSCR has received understated media attention in Yemen (far less than the President's daily statements on Iraq), and even contacts firmly opposed to war do not see efforts by France et al. in the Council as likely to forestall conflict.

16. (C) Yemeni public reaction is opposed to a possible war; however, the vehemence of opposition is not as acute as concern for internal Yemeni matters and the Palestinian issue. With parliamentary elections coming in two months' time and a worsening economy, many Yemenis are more concerned with how to feed their families.

17. (C) Comment: President Saleh and other government leaders are playing up their opposition rhetoric, partially as a means to keep the "street" in line. However, the underlying reality in Yemen is a studied balance of support for the Iraqi people and conspicuous non-support for Saddam. Those Embassy contacts who urge a quick end to a war they see as inevitable appear to be fatigued by the limbo imposed by the last several months' wait, and perhaps concerned about

what a prolonged war would mean for internal Yemeni issues
like the parliamentary elections. End Comment.

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